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INFO RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 6970
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RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 5126
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JCS PASS J-5/CDR S. WRIGHT

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2006

In Today's Papers

The Hamas Visit Controversy Continues
Milliyet, Hurriyet, Vatan, Cumhuriyet, Aksam, Yeni Safak, Zaman and others: On the Hamas visit to Ankara last week, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul said that Turkey had carried out its historical responsibilities. Gul said an Israeli spokesman's comments on the PKK were not printed by the Israeli media, while Turkish press covered the statement in detail. "I see that the Turkish media is open to manipulation by the intelligence services and diplomats," Gul said, prompting the diplomatic correspondents' association to issue a statement saying his comments are unfair. Zaman reports that the Israeli envoy to the UN Danny Gillerman has told the UN Security Council meeting yesterday that together with Iran and Syria, Hamas formed a new "terror axis." "Would your countries allow al-Qaida or the PKK to run in elections?" Gillermann asked. Papers report Gul as saying that Israel, Russia and the US had been informed in advance about the Hamas visit.

The Israeli Ambassador in Ankara, Pinhas Avivi told the press at a reception yesterday that Turkey and Israel should continue to put the past aside and move forward, stressing that cooperation between the two countries would continue.

Palestinian Ambassador Nabil Marouf singled out Prime Minister Erdogan as the "architect" of the Palestinians' visit to Turkey, adding that Erdogan had consulted President Mahmoud Abbas regarding the messages to be conveyed to Hamas, Aksam reports. Isolation of Hamas would bring more violence, Marouf said. Dailies quote Hamas chief Mashal as telling the press in Tehran that Hamas can learn from Turkey's experience on administration and cultural and economic development, not from its democracy.

Yeni Safak says the State Department said in a statement that the US had received information from Turkey with regard to the Hamas visit. State Department Spokesman Ereli said US and Turkey are in consensus that a strong message must be given to Hamas to renounce terror.

Hasan Cemal writing in mainstream Milliyet wonders "whether the Bush administration is going to do a u-turn on the Democracy for Middle East Project?" Cemal believes after the "occupation of Iraq and the "continuing scenes of torture," it "does not matter when Bush calls for democracy because he will not be taken seriously."

Secretary Rice in Egypt

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All papers: In Egypt on the first leg of her Middle East tour aimed at isolating Hamas, Secretary Rice said at a joint press conference with the Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit that Hamas must renounce terror and recognize the existence of Israel. Aboul Gheit said Hamas must be given a chance, stressing that it will be wrong to cut financial aid to Palestine. Rice also discussed Palestine and the political reforms process in Egypt with President Mubarak. Papers quote political observers as warning that Egyptians are forced to choose between the Mubarak dictatorship and the banned Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Commenting in the conservative daily Turkiye, Yilmaz Oztuna says that by asking Arab capitals to cut off financial aid to Palestine, Secretary Rice made a mistake "which is totally out of character given her diplomatic skills." Noting that if aid is cut, "the bill is to be paid by Palestinian people and they will suffer more than before," Oztuna concludes that "it looks like Palestinians are about

ANKARA 00000904 002 OF 002

to be punished only because they voted for Hamas even though the Westerners allowed it as a political party before the election process began."

Shiite Shrine Bombing in Iraq

All papers cover a bomb attack in Samarra which destroyed the dome of one of Shiite Islam's holiest shrines, prompting reprisal attacks against 27 Sunni mosques in Baghdad that left three clerics and three worshippers dead. Dailies comment that the incidents have raised fears of sectarian civil war in Iraq. They speculate that the Samarra bombing, carried out by men dressed in police uniforms, was launched by al-Zarqawi, who has declared war on the country's Shiites.

Turkish Foreign Ministry (MFA) "strongly" condemned in a statement yesterday the deadly sectarian violence in Iraq, urging Iraqis to refrain from reprisals after the bombing of the Shiite shrine. "It is obvious that the aim of those who resort to terrorism is to start sectarian and ethnic conflict in Iraq. The most efficient way to undo this game is to remain prudent in the face of those inhumane provocations, refrain from reprisals and strengthen national unity," the MFA said.

Television Highlights
(NTV, 7:00 AM)

Domestic News

- Turkey and Iran sign memorandum of understanding at the end of a three-day security meeting. Interior Ministry officials in the Turkish delegation in Tehran said the two countries agreed to combat terrorism.

- Turkish High Court "Danistay" annuls the provisions of a recent controversial regulation exempting Koran courses from Education Ministry inspections. Teachers' union Egitim-Sen

had applied for the annulment of the regulation.

International News

- Shiite protesters attack dozens of Sunni mosques across Iraq in reprisal for the attack on the holy Golden Mosque in the Shiite city of Samarra. Mobs attacked 60 mosques in Iraq.

- Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schussel urged Ankara to recognize the Republic of Cyprus by the end of 2006.

- UNSYG Annan called on the Turkish and Spanish foreign ministers to open a second meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations in Qatar to resolve the row over the Prophet Muhammad cartoons. Annan, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and Arab League officials will also attend the meeting to be held in Doha on Saturday.

WILSON